



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

similarity of thought, the mind, however well trained in literary orthodoxy, begins to

“First endure, then pity, then embrace.”

And the best of it is that, after one cordial embrace, the most friendly feeling springs up between author and reader. The newt's eye, the frog's toe, the bat's wool, and the dog's tongue in the witches' caldron call to mind some half-forgotten passage from the *Sylva Sylvarum*; we find the same philosophical theory in the *De Augmentis* and Yorick's skull. In Falstaff's jests we have reminders of the Essay on Truth, and Mrs. Quickly recalls that on Marriage and Single Life. Fine vistas of strictly new and original fancy are opened, — whether Plato was not written by Aristotle, whether Frederick the Great was not the author of the works of Voltaire, whether Mill does not write Tennyson, or Tennyson does not write Mill. “Forsooth,” as Judge Holmes would say, this is matter of interest, and for our part we are ready to admit that Bacon wrote Shakespeare, unless, indeed, Shakespeare wrote Bacon.

10. — *The Life and Letters of JAMES GATES PERCIVAL.* By JULIUS H. WARD. Boston: Ticknor and Fields. 1866. 12mo. pp. xiv., 583.

THIS is an interesting and in many respects instructive book. Mr. Ward has done his work, as is fitting, in a loving spirit; and if he over-estimates both what Percival was and what he did, he enables us to form our own judgment by letting him so far as possible speak for himself. The book gives a rather curious picture of what the life of a man of letters is likely to be in a country not yet ripe for literary production, especially if he be not endowed with the higher qualities which command and can wait for that best of all successes which comes slowly. In a generation where everybody can write verses, and where certain modes of thought and turns of phrase have become so tyrannous that it is as hard to distinguish between the productions of one minor poet and another as among those of so many Minnesingers or Troubadours, there is a demand for only two things, — for what chimes with the moment's whim of popular sentiment and is forgotten when that has changed, or for what is never an anachronism, because it slakes or seems to slake the eternal thirst of our nature for those ideal waters that glimmer before us and still before us in ever-renewing mirage. Percival met neither of these conditions. With a nature singularly unplastic, unsympathetic, and self-involved, he was incapable of receiving into his own mind the ordinary emotions of men and giv-

ing them back in music; and with a lofty conception of the object and purposes of poesy, he had neither the resolution nor the power which might have enabled him to realize it. He offers as striking an example as could be found of the poetic temperament unballasted with those less obvious qualities which make the poetic faculty. His verse carries every inch of canvas that diction and sentiment can crowd, but the craft is cranky, and we miss that deep-grasping keel of reason which alone can steady and give direction. His mind drifts, it does not answer the helm, and in his longer poems, like "Prometheus," half the voyage is spent in trying to make up for a lee-way which becomes at last irretrievable. If he had a port in view when he set out, he seems soon to give up all hope of ever reaching it; and wherever we open the log-book, we find him running for nowhere in particular, as the wind happens to lead, or lying-to in the merest gale of verbiage. The truth is, that Percival was led to the writing of verse by a sentimental desire of the mind, and not by that concurring instinct of all the faculties which is a self-forgetting passion of the entire man. Too excitable to possess his subject fully, as a man of mere talent may often do, he is not possessed by it as the man of genius is, and seems helplessly striving, the greater part of the time, to make out what, in the name of common or uncommon sense, he is after. With all the stock properties of verse whirling and dancing about his ears puffed out with an empty show of life, the reader of much of his blank verse feels as if a mob of well-draped clothes-lines were rioting about him in all the unwilling ecstasy of a thunder-gust.

Percival, living from 1795 to 1856, arrived at manhood just as the last war with England had come to an end. Poor, shy, and proud, there is nothing in his earlier years that might not be paralleled in those of hundreds of sensitive boys who gradually get the nonsense shaken out of them in the rough school of life. The length of the schooling needful in his case is what makes it peculiar. Not till after he was fifty, if even then, did he learn that the world never takes a man at his own valuation, and never pays money for what it does not want, or think it wants. It did not want his poetry, simply because it was not, is not, and by no conceivable power of argument can be made, interesting,—the first duty of every artistic product. Percival, who would have thought his neighbors mad if they had insisted on his buying twenty thousand refrigerators merely because they had been at the trouble of making them, and found it convenient to turn them into cash, could never forgive the world for taking this business view of the matter in his own case. He went on doggedly, making refrigerators of every possible pattern, and comforted himself with the thought of a

wiser posterity, which should have learned that the purpose of poetry is to cool and not to kindle. His "Mind," which is on the whole perhaps the best of his writings, vies in coldness with the writings of his brother doctor, Akenside, whose "Pleasures of Imagination" are something quite other than pleasing in reality. If there be here and there a semblance of pale fire, it is but the reflection of moonshine upon ice. Akenside is respectable, because he really had something new to say, in spite of his pompous, mouthing way of saying it; but when Percival says it over again, it is a little too much. In his more ambitious pieces, — and it is curious how literally the word "pieces" applies to all he did, — he devotes himself mainly to telling us what poetry ought to be, as if mankind were not always more than satisfied with any one who fulfils the true office of poet, by showing them, with the least possible fuss, what it is. Percival was a professor of poetry rather than a poet, and we are not surprised at the number of lectures he reads us, when we learn that in early life he was an excellent demonstrator of anatomy, whose subject must be dead before his business with it begins. His interest in poetry was always more or less scientific. He was forever trying experiments in matter and form, especially the latter. And these were especially unhappy, because it is plain that he had no musical ear, or at best a very imperfect one. His attempts at classical metres are simply unreadable, whether as verse or prose. He contrives to make even the Sapphic so, which when we read it in Latin moves fealty to our modern accentuation. Let any one who wishes to feel the difference between ear and no ear compare Percival's specimens with those in the same kind of Coleridge, who had the finest metrical sense since Milton. We take this very experimenting to be a sufficient proof that Percival's faculty, such as it was, and we do not rate it highly, was artificial, and not innate. The true poet is much rather experimented upon by life and nature, by joy and sorrow, by beauty and defect, till it be found out whether he have any hidden music in him that can sing them into an accord with the eternal harmony which we call God.

It is easy to trace the literary influences to which the mind of Percival was in turn subjected. Early in life we find a taint of Byronism, which indeed does not wholly disappear to the last. There is among his poems "An Imprecation," of which a single stanza will suffice as a specimen: —

" Wrapped in sheets of gory lightning,  
While cursed night-hags ring thy knell,  
May the arm of vengeance bright'ning,  
O'er thee wave the sword of hell ! "

If we could fancy Laura Matilda shut up tipsy in the watch-house, we

might suppose her capable of this melodious substitute for swearing. We confess that we cannot read it without laughing, after learning from Mr. Ward that its Salmoneus-thunderbolts were launched at the comfortable little city of Hartford, because the poet fancied that the inhabitants thereof did not like him or his verses so much as he himself did. There is something deliciously ludicrous in the conception of night-hags ringing the orthodox bell of the Second Congregational or First Baptist Meeting-house to summon the parishioners to witness these fatal consequences of not reading Percival's poems. Nothing less than the fear of some such catastrophe could compel the perusal of the greater part of them. Next to Byron comes Moore, whose cloying sentimentalism and too facile melody are recalled by the subject and treatment of very many of the shorter lyrics of Percival. In "Prometheus" it is Shelley who is paramount for the time, and Shelley at his worst period, before his unwieldy abundance of incoherent words and images, that were merely words and images without any meaning of real experience to give them solidity, had been compressed in the stricter moulds of thought and study. In the blank verse again, we encounter Wordsworth's tone and sentiment. These were no good models for Percival, who always improvised, and who seems to have thought verse the great distinction between poetry and prose. Percival got nothing from Shelley but the fatal copiousness which is his vice, nothing from Wordsworth but that tendency to preach at every corner about a sympathy with nature which is not his real distinction, and which becomes a wearisome cant at second-hand. Shelley and Wordsworth are both stilted, though in different ways. Shelley wreathed his stilts with flowers; while Wordsworth, protesting against the use of them as sinful, mounts his solemnly at last, and stalks away conscientiously eschewing whatever would serve to hide the naked wood, — nay, was it not Gray's only that were scandalous, and were not his own, modelled upon those of the sainted Cowper, of strictly orthodox pattern after all? Percival, like all imitators, is caught by the defects of what he copies, and exaggerates them. With him the stilts are the chief matter; and getting a taller pair than either of his predecessors, he lifts his commonplace upon them only to make it more drearily conspicuous. Shelley has his gleams of unearthly wildfire, Wordsworth is by fits the most deeply inspired man of his generation; but Percival has no lucid interval. He is pertinaciously and unappeasably dull, — as dull as a comedy of Goethe. He never in his life wrote a rememberable verse. We should not have thought this of any consequence now, for we need not try to read him, did not Mr. Ward with amusing gravity all along assume that he was a great poet. There was scarce timber enough in

him for the making of a Tiedge or a Hagedorn, both of whom he somewhat resembles.

Percival came to maturity at an unfortunate time for a man so liable to self-delusion. Leaving college with so imperfect a classical training (in spite of the numerous "testimonials" cited by Mr. Ward) that he was capable of laying the accent on the second syllable of Pericles, he seems never to have systematically trained even such faculty as was in him, but to have gone on to the end mistaking excitability of brain for wholesome exercise of thought. The consequence is a prolonged immaturity, which makes his latest volume, published in 1843, as crude and as plainly wanting in enduring quality as the first number of his "Clio." We have the same old complaints of neglected genius, — as if genius could ever be neglected so long as it has the perennial consolation of its own divine society, — the same wilted sentiment, the same feeling about for topics of verse in which he may possibly find that inspiration from without which the true poet cannot flee from in himself. These tedious wailings about heavenly powers suffocating in the heavy atmosphere of an uncongenial, unrecognizing world, and Percival is profuse of them, are simply an advertisement to whoever has ears of some innate disability in the man who utters them. Heavenly powers know very well how to take care of themselves. The poor "World," meaning thereby that small fraction of society which has any personal knowledge of an author or his affairs, has had great wrong done it in such matters. It is not, and never was, the powers of a man that it neglects, — it could not if it would, — but his weaknesses, and especially the publication of them, of which it grows weary. It can never supply any man with what is wanting in himself, and the attempt to do it only makes bad worse. If a man can find the proof of his own genius only in public appreciation, still worse, if his vanity console itself with taking it as an evidence of rare qualities in himself that his fellow-mortals are unable to see them, it is all up with him. The "World" resolutely refused to find Wordsworth entertaining, and it refuses still, on good grounds; but the genius that was in him bore up unflinchingly, would take no denial, got its claim admitted on all hands, and impregnated at last the literature of an entire generation, though *habitans in sicco*, if ever genius did. But Percival seems to have satisfied himself with a syllogism something like this: Men of genius are neglected; the more neglect, the more genius; I am altogether neglected, — *ergo*, wholly made up of that priceless material.

The truth was that he suffered rather from over-appreciation; and "when," says a nameless old Frenchman, "I see a man go up like a rocket, I expect before long to see the stick come down." The times

were singularly propitious to mediocrity. As in Holland, one had only to

“Invent a shovel and be a magistrate,”

so here to write a hundred blank verses was to be immortal, till somebody else wrote a hundred and fifty blanker ones. It had been resolved unanimously that we must and would have a national literature. England, France, Spain, Italy, each already had one, Germany was getting one made as fast as possible, and Ireland vowed that she once had one far surpassing them all. To be respectable, we must have one also, and that speedily. That we were not yet, in any true sense, a nation; that we wanted that literary and social atmosphere which is the breath of life to all artistic production; that our scholarship, such as it was, was mostly of that theological sort which acts like a prolonged drouth upon the brain; that our poetic fathers were Joel Barlow and Timothy Dwight, was nothing to the purpose; — a literature adapted to the size of the country was what we must and would have. Given the number of square miles, the length of the rivers, the size of the lakes, and you have the greatness of the literature we were bound to produce without further delay. If that little dribble of an Avon had succeeded in engendering Shakespeare, what a giant might we not look for from the mighty womb of Mississippi! Physical Geography for the first time took her rightful place as the tenth and most inspiring Muse. A glance at the map would satisfy the most incredulous that she had done her best for us, and should we be wanting to the glorious opportunity? Not we indeed! So surely as Franklin invented the art of printing, and Fulton the steam-engine, we would invent us a great poet in time to send the news by the next packet to England, and teach her that we were her masters in arts as well as arms.

Percival was only too ready to be invented, and he forthwith produced his bale of verses from a loom capable of turning off a hitherto unheard-of number of yards to the hour, and perfectly adapted to the amplitude of our territory, inasmuch as it was manufactured on the theory of covering the largest surface with the least possible amount of meaning that would hold words together. He was as ready to accept the perilous emprise, and as loud in asserting his claim thereto, as Sir Kay used to be, and with much the same result. Our critical journals — and America certainly *has* led the world in a department of letters which of course requires no outfit but the power to read and write, gratuitously furnished by our public schools — received him with a shout of welcome. Here came the true deliverer at last, mounted on a steed to which he himself had given the new name of “Pegāsus,” — for we were to be original in everything, — and certainly blowing his

own trumpet with remarkable vigor of lungs. Solitary enthusiasts, who had long awaited this sublime avatar, addressed him in sonnets which he accepted with a gravity beyond all praise. (To be sure, even Mr. Ward seems to allow that his sense of humor was hardly equal to his other transcendent endowments.) His path was strewn with laurel — of the native variety, altogether superior to that of the Old World, and certainly not precisely like it. Verses signed “P.,” as like each other as two peas, and as much like poetry as that vegetable is like a peach, were watched for in the corner of a newspaper as an astronomer watches for a new planet. There was never anything so comically unreal since the crowning in the Capitol of Messer Francesco Petrarca, Grand Sentimentalist in Ordinary at the Court of King Robert of Naples. Unhappily, Percival took it all quite seriously. There was no praise too ample for the easy elasticity of his swallow. He believed himself as gigantic as the shadow he cast on these rolling mists of insubstantial adulation, and life-long he could never make out why *his* fine words refused to butter his parsnips for him, nay, to furnish both parsnips and sauce. While the critics were debating precisely how many of the prime qualities of the great poets of his own and preceding generations he combined in his single genius, and in what particular respects he surpassed them all, — a point about which he himself seems never to have had any doubts, — the public, which could read Scott and Byron with avidity, and which was beginning even to taste Wordsworth, found his verses inexpressibly wearisome. They would not throng and subscribe for a collected edition of those works which singly had been too much for them. With whatever dulness of sense they may be charged, they have a remarkably keen scent for tediousness, and will have none of it unless in a tract or sermon, where, of course, it is to be expected. Percival never forgave the public; but it was the critics that he never should have forgiven, for of all the maggots that can make their way into the brains through the ears, there is none so disastrous as the persuasion that you are a great poet. There is surely something in the construction of the ears of small authors which lays them specially open to the inroads of this pest. It tickles pleasantly while it eats away the fibre of will, and incapacitates a man for all honest commerce with realities. Unhappily its insidious titillation seems to have been Percival's one great pleasure during life.

We began by saying that the book before us was interesting and instructive; but we meant that it was so not so much from any positive merits of its own as by the lesson which almost every page of it suggests. To those who have some knowledge of the history of literature, or some experience in life, it is from beginning to end a history of



weakness mistaking great desires for great powers. If poetry, in Bacon's noble definition of it, "adapt the shows of things to the desires of the mind," sentimentalism is equally skilful in making realities shape themselves to the cravings of vanity. The theory that the poet is a being above the world and apart from it is true of him as an observer only who applies to the phenomena about him the test of a finer and more spiritual sense. That he is a creature divinely set apart from his fellow-men by a mental organization that makes them mutually unintelligible to each other, is in flat contradiction with the lives of those poets universally acknowledged as greatest. Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Calderon, Milton, Molière, Goethe, — in what conceivable sense is it true of them that they wanted the manly qualities which made them equal to the demands of the world in which they lived? That a poet should assume, as Victor Hugo used to do, that he is a reorganizer of the moral world, and that works cunningly adapted to the popular whim of the time form part of some mysterious system which is to give us a new heaven and a new earth, and to remodel laws of art which are as unchangeable as those of astronomy, can do no very great harm to any one but the author himself, who will thereby be led astray from his proper function, and from the only path to legitimate and lasting success. But when the theory is carried a step further, and we are asked to believe, as in Percival's case, that, because a man can write verses, he is exempt from that inexorable logic of life and circumstance to which all other men are subjected, and to which it is wholesome for them that they should be, then it becomes mischievous, and calls for a protest from all those who have at heart the interests of good morals and healthy literature. It is the theory of idlers and *dilettanti*, of fribbles in morals and declaimers in verse, which a young man of real power may dally with during some fit of mental indigestion, but which when accepted by a mature man, and carried along with him through life, is a sure mark of feebleness and of insincere dealing with himself. Percival is a good example of a class of authors unhappily too numerous in these latter days. In Europe the natural growth of a world ill at ease with itself and still nervous with the frightful palpitation of the French Revolution, they are but feeble exotics in our healthier air. Without faith or hope, and deprived of that outward support in the habitual procession of events and in the authoritative limitations of thought which in ordinary times gives steadiness to feeble and timid intellects, they are turned inward, and forced, like Hudibras's sword,

"To eat into themselves, for lack  
Of other thing to hew and hack."

Compelled to find within them that stay which had hitherto been sup-

plied by creeds and institutions, they learned to attribute to their own consciousness the grandeur which belongs of right only to the mind of the human race, slowly endeavoring after an equilibrium between its desires and the external conditions under which they are attainable. Hence that exaggeration of the individual, and depreciation of the social man, which has become the cant of modern literature. Abundance of such phenomena accompanied the rise of what was called Romanticism in Germany and France, reacting to some extent even upon England, and consequently America. The smaller poets erected themselves into a kind of guild, into which all were admitted who gave proof of a certain feebleness of character which rendered them superior to their grosser fellow-men. It was a society of cripples undertaking to teach the new generation how to walk. Meanwhile the object of their generous solicitude, what with clinging to Mother Past's skirts, and helping itself by every piece of household furniture it could lay hands on, learned, after many a tumble, to get on its legs, and to use them as other generations had done before it. Percival belonged to this new order of bards, weak in the knees, and thinking it healthy exercise to climb the peaks of Dreamland. To the vague and misty views attainable from those sublime summits into his own vast interior, his reports in blank verse and otherwise did ample justice, but failed to excite the appetite of mankind. He spent his life, like others of his class, in proclaiming himself a neglected Columbus, ever ready to start on his voyage when the public would supply the means of building his ships. Meanwhile, to be ready at a moment's warning, he packs his mind pellmell like a carpet-bag, wraps a geologist's hammer in a shirt with a Byron collar, does up Volney's "Ruins" with an odd volume of Wordsworth, and another of Bell's "Anatomy" in a loose sheet of Webster's Dictionary, jams Moore's poems between the leaves of Bopp's Grammar, — and forgets only such small matters as combs and brushes. It never seems to have entered his head that the gulf between genius and its new world is never too wide for a stout swimmer. Like all sentimentalists, he reversed the process of nature, which makes it a part of greatness that it is a simple thing to itself, however much of a marvel it may be to other men. He discovered his own genius, as he supposed, — a thing impossible had the genius been real. Donne never wrote a profounder verse than

"Who knows his virtue's name and place, hath none."

Percival's life was by no means a remarkable one, except, perhaps, in the number of chances that seem to have been offered him to have made something of himself, if anything were possibly to be made. He

was never without friends, never without opportunities, if he could have availed himself of them. It is pleasant to see Mr. Ticknor treating him with that considerate kindness which many a young scholar can remember as shown so generously to himself. But nothing could help Percival, whose nature had defeat worked into its very composition. He was not a real, but an imaginary man. His early attempt at suicide (as Mr. Ward seems to think it) is typical of him. He is not the first young man who, when crossed in love, has spoken of "loupin o'er a linn," nor will he be the last. But that any one who really meant to kill himself should put himself resolutely in the way of being prevented, as Percival did, is hard to believe. Chateaubriand, the arch sentimentalist of these latter days, had the same harmless *velleity* of self-destruction, — enough to scare his sister and so give him a smack of sensation, — but a very different thing from the settled will which would be really perilous. Shakespeare, always true to Nature, makes Hamlet dally with the same exciting fancy. Alas! self is the one thing the sentimentalist never truly wishes to destroy! One remarkable gift Percival seems to have had, which may be called memory of the eye. What he saw he never forgot, and this fitted him for a good geological observer. How great his power of combination was, which alone could have made him a great geologist, we cannot determine. But he seems to have shown but little in other directions. His faculty of acquiring foreign tongues we do not value so highly as Mr. Ward. We have known many otherwise inferior men who possessed it. Indeed, the power to express the same nothing in ten different languages is something to be dreaded rather than admired. It gives a horrible advantage to dulness. The best thing to be learned from Percival's life is that he was happy for the first time when taken away from his vague pursuit of the ideal, and set to practical work.

---

11. — *Laus Veneris, and other Poems and Ballads.* By ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE. New York: Carleton. pp. 328.

IF it were Mr. Swinburne's desire, in giving this volume to the world, to provoke violent antagonisms, and achieve that notoriety which has its recognized business value, he has certainly succeeded. His career as an author, though so brief, has already reversed all the traditions of literature. Other poets, possessed with a reverent comprehension of their art, would gladly put out of the way the first crude wind-falls which precede the maturer fruit; but he, having gained a respectful hearing by his "Atalanta in Calydon," immediately goes back upon